

House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee Call for Evidence: **Soft power: a strategy for UK success?**

Response from the British Academy

February 2025

About the British Academy

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. From artificial intelligence to climate change, from building prosperity to improving well-being – today's complex challenges can only be resolved by deepening our insight into people, cultures and societies. We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engage the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone.

About this submission

This submission represents the views of the British Academy, not one specific individual. We would be pleased to further discuss any elements of the response.

- **Why is soft power important? How might this concept be measured? What tangible benefits does soft power provide to the UK's international relationships? To trade? To support for the rules-based international order?**
- **What should the objective of soft power be, for example, to achieve economic growth for the UK overseas, bolster its influence or other?**
- **How effective is the FCDO in leading HMG's soft power approach across Government, and overseas? Where can these efforts be improved? What contribution should the Soft Power Council make?**

In March 2014, a British Academy report by Christopher Hill and Sarah Beadle on *The Art of Attraction: Soft Power and the UK's Role in the World* discussed the importance of soft power in the UK, as well as the benefits it provides for the UK. While much has changed since its publication, its key points remain relevant and applicable today. The report emphasises that the objective of soft power is for the UK to create an image that is considered desirable and worth emulating throughout the world. This can be done through resources including “a nation's culture, defined as a set of practices that create meaning and identity for a society; political values, when lived up to home and abroad; and foreign policy, when regarded as legitimate and having moral authority.”¹ Investing in this image, trust, and reputation will allow the UK to thus bolster its influence abroad and create growth and economic opportunities for the UK. Soft power is thus a critical tool to tackle the challenges affecting the UK both domestically and globally. The *Art of Attraction* set out a series of recommendations² for governments that stand true today. These were:

- To refrain from direct interference in soft power assets.
- To invest in and sustain soft power institutions such as the BBC, the British Council, and the education system over the long term, and at arm's length.
- To recognise that hard and soft power, like power and influence more generally, reside on a continuum rather than being an either-or choice.
- To understand that the power of example is far more effective than preaching.
- To pay careful attention to the consequences of official foreign policy for Britain's reputation, identity and domestic society, ensuring that geopolitical and socio-economic goals are not pursued in separate compartments.
- To accept that the majority of ways in which countries interact entail using the assets which make up 'soft power', whatever political vocabulary we choose.

Despite various attempts to measure soft power, the report expressed scepticism of the value of such measurements and indices given that such analysis is reliant on the definitions of the terms used for measurement, which are inherently subjective. The important consideration is less how to compare the UK's soft power than how the UK's soft power assets can be used for the national benefit. The UK government should focus on getting the best out of its existing resources. A balance must be struck that avoids overt interference while ensuring cultivation rather than neglect. If the state does not provide enough resources for the development and maintenance of its long-term assets – such as language teaching in schools or the university research base – they will both diminish in scale and lose their distinctive national character.

¹ Christopher Hill and Sarah Beadle, *The Art of Attraction: Soft Power and the UK's Role in the World*, March 2014, p.11 <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/322/the-art-attraction-soft-power-and-uks-role-world.pdf>

² Hill and Beadle, *The Art of Attraction*, p.8

- **What are the UK's soft power strengths, with reference to diplomacy, post-conflict reconstruction, culture, the media, the economy and education?**
- **How is the UK perceived overseas? In what ways does this perception differ regionally or by country?**

The UK has at its disposal an important set of tangible and intangible soft power assets that are central to the UK's efforts to deliver future aims linked to the priorities mentioned in this question. We argue that firstly, the UK has some of the most influential Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy (SHAPE) research globally, a position that allows it to exercise soft power in research and innovation.³ Secondly, in a highly globalised system of higher education, a strong and vibrant university sector is another key driver of soft power. This is a core strength of the UK. Thirdly, UK universities' research, particularly in the SHAPE disciplines, has a remarkable international impact and transformative role.⁴ However, these important levers will require investment and support if they are to continue to contribute to soft power.

In a recent preprint written by British Academy staff and collaborators from Digital Science on *Understanding the importance of SHAPE to the UK research ecosystem*, it has been argued that a country's soft power in a research context can be thought of as its ability to influence the global research conversation towards its norms and viewpoints.⁵ One way of doing this is through international co-authorship, where the exchange of ideas leads to bi-directional movements of norms and perspectives. The UK enjoys significant and enduring influence in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), this research demonstrates that its international influence in SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy) research is even more pronounced. The UK is both significantly more influential than China and much closer to the US's leading degree of influence in SHAPE disciplines. This includes in relation to partnership with business – often linked to patents – where SHAPE research is especially collaborative on a global scale.

UK universities are a significant soft power asset for the UK as the knowledge, research, and the individual graduate careers that they enable have wide-ranging and long-standing influence⁶ throughout the world. For example, in 2017, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences graduates made up approximately 46% of the 2.32 million university students in the United Kingdom, 55% of global leaders and 58% of Financial Times Stock Exchange Executives.⁷ The best scholars in this field want to come and work in the UK as a result, and thousands of students from around the world want to come and study here. This boosts the UK's soft power. It creates networks and future investments of knowledge and expertise that support a wide range of areas, from diplomatic efforts to work on human rights and conflict. It means the UK educates some of the world leaders of tomorrow. And more broadly, international students foster a sense of connection and affinity with the UK as a study destination.

³ Hélène Draux et al, 'Understanding the importance of SHAPE to the UK research ecosystem', <https://arxiv.org/html/2501.16701v1>

⁴ <https://shape-impact.co.uk/>

⁵ Draux et al, 'Understanding the importance of SHAPE'

⁶ The British Academy, *Universities as Social & Cultural Infrastructure: Roundtable summary note*, 2024 <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/universities-as-social-cultural-infrastructure-roundtable-summary-note/>

⁷ Sophie Hedges et. al, *Understanding the career paths of AHSS graduates in the UK and their contribution to the economy*, April 2019, [understanding-career_paths-AHSS-graduates.pdf](#), pg. ii

However, in the context of this extended history of UK soft power success that the UK's higher education sector has been facing a funding crisis, threatening the UK's world-leading reputation in research, eroding the UK's international standing in this area, and impacting international partnerships and collaborations. SHAPE disciplines, in particular, are being cut and reduced. To combat this, there should be a responsible and open immigration system for international students which recognises that the strength of our universities lies in their international character. Further, an urgent review of higher education funding should develop a sustainable model that delivers a wide breadth of subjects and is resilient to regional inequalities in provision.⁸

Despite this abundance of soft power resources, the UK government's ability to mobilise them on a day-to-day basis is limited – and indeed, as *The Art of Attraction* noted, there are serious questions about the extent to which it should do so. Soft power is not easy to translate into policy – and efforts to exploit it may give rise to unintended consequences. Soft power can easily backfire if the state fails to take into account its interplay with other, more assertive, external policies when hoping to benefit from the 'power of attraction'. The UK government's mobilisation of soft power needs to be smart, and often also light-touch, in order to be convincing. Heavy-handed soft power actions may backfire.

- **How do FCDO arms-length bodies, including the British Council, BBC World Service and British International Investment, contribute towards the UK's soft power strengths? What is the value for money of these organisations, when considering soft power returns?**
- **How might the FCDO engage with the media and the private sector to strengthen its soft power offering?**

The BBC World Service's and the British Council's global reach play an important part in promoting the UK's image abroad. Soft power begins at home, as reputation and trust are both intimately linked to the nature of domestic achievements. Despite their relatively low cost to the public purse, higher education, cultural organisations, arts and museums, the BBC World Service, the British Council and other soft power assets have not been protected from financial cutbacks. Neither have the substantial advantages of proper investment in them been fully recognised. If governments are patient enough to wait for the long-term gains, they will reap more benefits than by striving too hard to deploy these potential assets in heavy-handed soft-power approaches or by running them down for the quick fix of improving a budget deficit.⁹

- **How does HMG demonstrate commitment to supporting British soft power sectors abroad?**
- **How does soft power interact with and complement the UK's foreign policy? In what ways does soft power support the UK's foreign policy? Are there challenges in this relationship?**

Research and innovation are increasingly moving to the forefront in many countries' policymaking apparatuses and aspirations. In the UK that has included a focus on securing 'strategic advantage', especially in certain technologies. In June 2021, it formed part of the rationale for establishing a ministerial National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) and an

⁸ The British Academy, *A manifesto for the Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts*, 2024 <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/manifesto-social-sciences-humanities-arts/>

⁹ Hill and Beadle, *The Art of Attraction*, p.7

Office for Science and Technology Strategy (OSTS), both of which were designed to protect the UK's competitive edge. As Sir Patrick Vallance, the then Government Chief Scientific Adviser, noted, *"The number of countries that now employ science and technology strategically is much greater than ever before, and they are very alive to the fact that this capability can give them an advantage."*¹⁰

This shift is happening because research and innovation are central to countries' efforts to deliver future aims linked to foreign policy, national security, resilience and economic stability. However, defining what constitutes strategic advantage raises important questions. Do current UK strengths in research and innovation, including in SHAPE disciplines, already provide this advantage? How can we optimise opportunities across these areas to fulfil broader national and international policy objectives? Research supported by the Academy has a simple and singular finding with regard to the role of the SHAPE disciplines in this wider ecosystem. UK strengths and foundations are in the connectedness of its research base internationally, and this connectedness is deeply rooted in the SHAPE disciplines.¹¹ For example, the Academy funds several incoming and outgoing research mobility programmes. Over the years, these have produced entire cadres of experts, teaching and researching in the best universities worldwide, and all using the links between the UK and the world as a core of their thinking and educating.

To date in the UK, grasping strategic advantage and providing international science leadership has been presented as being defined by focusing on specific emerging and frontier technologies. However, our evidence indicates that such an approach risks underplaying the UK's strengths and the long-term foundations of its leadership and soft power, namely its connectedness. Our analysis suggests a need to rebalance and stabilise policy and investment to support the foundations of connectedness, alongside the UK's frontier and emerging technology policy aims. Prioritising connectedness leads to a focus on policies that will enable a broader understanding of innovation and where it comes from, especially in the context of the UK economy; mobility and immigration policy; the pipeline of researchers and future researchers; broad-based funding opportunities; and adoption, diffusion, and strength in absorptive capacity. Our analysis suggests that future research and innovation policy needs to look beyond a singular gaze on and investment in frontier technologies, to a more sustainable, long-term and broad-based approach. This will require investing heavily in the research environment and foundations on which the development of technology, innovation and knowledge are based. UK research and innovation policy internationally should invest in the UK's connected capabilities and capacities as one of its primary aims, alongside technology priorities. The nine DSIT-funded British International Research Institutes (BIRI), strategically embedded across western Asia, Africa, and southern Europe, already provide springboards for projecting influence within key regions.

In addition, languages are strategically vital for the future of the UK and for its soft power. They are important for diplomacy,¹² furthering international partnerships, and leading alliances, as well as for business and trade, social cohesion and cultural understanding. Through language knowledge, UK diplomats and external-facing staff in other government departments can

¹⁰ Patrick Vallance, 'Creating strategic advantage in science and innovation', FST Journal, Vol. 23, Issue 2, July 2022, <https://www.foundation.org.uk/Journal/2022/Volume-23-Issue-2/Strategic-Advantage/Creating-strategic-advantage-in-science-and-innova>

¹¹ Draux et al, 'Understanding the importance of SHAPE'

¹² Dr Selina Chen and Anne Breivik, *Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security*, November 2013
https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/199/British_Academy_report_Lost_for_words_report.pdf

deepen their knowledge and build the trust that is necessary to promote and protect British values and interests internationally. Cooperation within and across borders is vital as we work to solve global challenges, and in an increasingly diverse and multipolar world, languages are more relevant than ever.^{13 14} Economically, [research from the University of Cambridge/RAND](#)¹⁵ shows that eradication of language barriers with Arabic, Chinese, French and Spanish-speaking countries could increase UK exports annually by c.£19bn, and previous research has estimated the economic cost of the UK's linguistic underperformance in terms of trade and investment at up to £48bn a year. [Improving capabilities in language and communication also improves development initiatives](#): such contextual, cultural knowledge and skills leverage the presence and impact of UK government and non-governmental agencies across the world.¹⁶

However, the UK is not fulfilling its linguistic potential, and language skills are eroding across the pipeline from education to employment, as well as in government. Language learning [continues to decline](#),¹⁷ provision in schools and [at post-16](#)¹⁸ is decreasing, and university language departments face cuts and closures which affect the pipeline of language teachers and the supply of much-needed linguists, including those speaking strategically important languages. Programmes such as the Mandarin Excellence Programme, which has [a proven track record of success](#) and creates a skill pool in a strategically vital language, are currently at risk.¹⁹ In *Towards a National Languages Strategy*, the British Academy and partners, including the British Council, make the case for a joined-up, UK-wide languages strategy, with concrete recommendations for short, medium and long-term actions aimed at improving language education and skills from primary level to further and higher education and thus restoring and reinvigorating the languages education pipeline.

- **How does the UK counter the soft power influence and narrative of other major powers including China, India, Russia and Turkey?**
- **What role do regional and international organisations play in bolstering the UK's soft power offer? How might the UK build partnerships and alliances with these organisations to achieve its soft power goals?**

Countries such as China, India, and Turkey are investing in their soft power capabilities, enhancing their strategic influence on the world stage. These countries have been particularly

¹³ Dr Selina Chen and Anne Breivik, *Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security*, November 2013

https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/199/British_Academy_report_Lost_for_words_report.pdf

¹⁴ British Academy, the Academy of Medical Sciences, the Royal Academy of Engineering and the Royal Society, *Languages in the UK: a call for action*, 2019

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/languages-uk-academies-statement/>

¹⁵ Wendy Ayres-Bennett et. al, 'The economic value to the UK of speaking other languages', February 2022 https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1814-1.html

¹⁶ University of Reading, 'Respecting communities in International Department: languages and cultural understanding', June 2018 https://www.reading.ac.uk/languages-cultures/-/media/project/uor-main/schools-departments/languages-and-cultures/documents/listening_zones_report_en.pdf?la=en&hash=B3D6A28F72A6358597C5B46F40BF065A

¹⁷ The British Council, 'Language Trends research series', 2025 <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight/research-series/language-trends>

¹⁸ The British Academy, 'Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England', 2024 <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/subject-choice-trends-post-16-education-england/>

¹⁹ IOE Confucius Institute for Schools, 'MEP INDEPENDENT EVALUATION 2016-2021', 2025 <https://ci.ioe.ac.uk/mandarin-excellence-programme/mep-independent-evaluation-2/>

active in promoting their languages and culture abroad. The UK needs to consider how to support its own soft power assets in this context and it would do well to invest in cultural instruments like the [British International Research Institutes](#) (BIRI) and the British Council, which have served as critical assets for the UK by developing cultural relations and exercising cultural influence with major and emerging powers.²⁰ The [BIRI](#) project the highest standards of the UK's interdisciplinary SHAPE research internationally, promote cultural dialogue and build capacity for shared benefit between UK-based scholars and international partners, including new generation thinkers and wider publics in and beyond their regions. The BIRI are expert at sharing and exchanging knowledge locally, regionally and internationally via conferences, publications, digital collections, policy advice, and public engagement²¹. All are at the forefront of training and supporting the next generation of internationally-facing researchers through their grants and other funding opportunities. They share values of academic excellence and interdisciplinarity to promote innovative scholarship; of partnership, bringing diverse voices together to exchange ideas and develop expertise; of understanding our shared humanity and what makes societies and people unique; and of intellectual and artistic creativity by fostering fresh engagements. Through this activity the BIRI significantly bolster the UK's soft power offering as well as providing a benefit-cost ratio of 1:0.7. It is worth noting that comparator institutions in France and Germany have much greater numbers of institutes, with greater government investment. In the cases of France and Germany, the equivalent institutions are explicitly regarded as instruments of soft power, and therefore vastly more heavily invested in by their respective governments. Should the UK wish to counter the soft power influence and narrative of other major powers, establishing new and investing more heavily in existing infrastructure such as the BIRI and the British Council would help to maintain a strong UK profile in regions at risk from hostile state actors. The UK government must accept that while this investment may not always produce immediate tangible payoffs, [consistent and sustainable funding will lead to long-term benefits](#) and will bolster the UK's diplomatic leadership.²²

Finally, multilateralism provides a range of tools to further gains in areas such as international development and should continue to be invested in, particularly as [investing in the institutions and practices which provide a platform for intelligent, constructive diplomacy can be viewed as long-term strategic relationship-building](#)²³. Enabling equitable international research collaboration is key to strengthening the UK's soft power influence particularly with low- and middle-income countries where actors such as China and Russia are increasingly investing. To counter this influence it is crucial that the UK continues to provide significant ODA funding for development research and ensures that the UK remains a favoured and trusted partner. The UK's participation in multilateral efforts allows the UK to demonstrate its expertise, maintain its international reputation, and solidify its role as a global leader. This then permits the UK the opportunity to take part in coordinating international action and policy on issues of major importance. Participating in these networks also offers the UK the [ability to shape the agendas and rules of powerful international bodies](#).²⁴

²⁰ Hill and Beadle, *The Art of Attraction*, p.41

²¹ British International Research Institutes Manifesto, 2021, https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3524/BIRI-Manifesto_2021.pdf

²² Hill and Beadle, *The Art of Attraction*, p.41

²³ Hill and Beadle, *The Art of Attraction*, p.46

²⁴ Hill and Beadle, *The Art of Attraction*, p.16